

SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT IN ARIZONA

What should I know?

Why is ADE releasing achievement profiles for schools?

The Achievement Profiles process – beginning October 15, 2002 – is the result of widespread calls for greater school improvement and accountability. Numerous communities – from parents to educators to business owners to policymakers – rallied for a meaningful system of school improvement that would ensure all Arizona students reach their full potential.

This public input sparked new legislation, which voters overwhelmingly passed to dedicate new school resources in exchange for greater accountability. This past spring and summer, policymakers met with schools and parents and other community stakeholders to outline components of that meaningful school accountability system. October 15, 2002 marks the beginning of its implementation.

Knowing how schools have performed over the past three years is Arizona's first step in a new, comprehensive approach toward school improvement.

What do the achievement profiles mean?

Achievement profiles tell administrators, teachers, parents and the public how a school has performed against recent statewide trends, precisely where a school needs help, and by how much it should progress in order to meet or exceed new growth benchmarks.

Schools are measured against themselves over a three-year period and against the direction all Arizona schools moved – not an arbitrarily set benchmark. One of four achievement profiles is assigned based on movement: excelling, improving, maintaining performance, or underperforming.

Can all kids reach the same standards?

Every child can learn at higher levels. The notion that disadvantaged kids can't achieve is a myth.

Students in rural, urban and low-income areas of the state have demonstrated exceptional gains equal to or beyond those in so-called "stable," high-income areas. Many southern Arizona border counties report higher test scores and lower dropout rates than the statewide average, despite the transient nature of families along the U.S.-Mexico border.

It is not appropriate to set different educational standards for students who may differ by socio-economic background. All students arrive with a capacity to learn. Arizona would be remiss to create separate expectations of achievement for students of varied income or ethnicity.

What does this mean for charter schools?

Charter schools are public schools and are included in this process. Charter schools are accountable for student academic achievement.

Are any schools exempt from this process?

More than 85 percent of Arizona's schools will be accounted for on Oct. 15 with an achievement profile. Some charter schools and some traditional schools may not receive a profile that day due to one of the following reasons:

- The school has not operated three full years
- The school serves only grades K-2
- The school has less than 16 students in a grade and is too small to fairly evaluate under this formula.
- The school is an accommodation facility serving adjudicated or hospitalized youth.

Why aren't there more "excelling" schools? I think my school is great.

Arizona Revised Statute §15-241 defines an "excelling school" as one where at least 90 percent of students meet or exceed AIMS standards for three consecutive years, 90 percent show One Year's Growth for three consecutive years, *and* if a high school, 90 percent graduate within five years *and* less than 6 percent drop out each year.

This is a difficult bar to reach, and possibly one that is too stringent based on recent performance of Arizona schools. There are excelling schools in Arizona making outstanding progress, but they do not meet the stringent definition in statute.

What must "underperforming" schools do this year?

Any school designated as "underperforming" will implement a school improvement plan with the help of residents in the school's attendance area and the Arizona Department of Education. Schools have 30 days to notify residents they are "underperforming." Schools have 90 days to develop an improvement plan.

Charter holders are required to notify parents if their school is "underperforming" and present an improvement plan to their charter sponsor at a special public meeting.

Schools will implement their improvement plan with dedicated assistance from the ADE, but correcting a school's deficiencies should be a collaborative effort between the school, the ADE, residents and parents.

Where will schools find resources for the help they need?

There is no doubt Arizona schools need more capacity to do their jobs well. We encourage the public to help the ADE amplify schools' needs to the state Legislature. In the meantime, as we struggle with state budget shortfalls, we must maximize what funds we do have, as well as remind parents of the valuable support they can supply at home.

This year, Arizona received more than \$150 million in new federal grant money, some of which is earmarked specifically for "underperforming" schools. That new money will be used to operate after-school tutoring centers for children and their family members, provide additional resources to small or rural schools, hire county reading

specialists and better train teachers in Reading instruction, and used for the recruitment and retention of special education teachers.

What should I tell my student?

Students should be reminded that a school's profile is not a brand for each student. Profiles were derived from the average of every test score in three subject areas for every student in the school. This would be a pertinent time to review what "averages" mean with students.

Express to students that the community (policymakers, businesses, moms and dads and others) care about them and want to see them succeed. The achievement profiles help everyone understand where students and schools need the most help. It will chart the progress as both reach achievement and devote new resources where necessary.

There are so many school labels and ratings. Why should I believe this system is fair?

ADE spent countless hours meeting with educators, business leaders, lawmakers, parents and the general public to gather input and create a fair assessment of our schools. The result is a comprehensive process using multiple indicators of school effectiveness.

All states are developing school accountability systems, due to coming federal requirements under President George W. Bush's "No Child Left Behind Act." We believe Arizona's system has unique traits that make it especially meaningful, fair and comprehensive:

- created with generous input from educators and the public, in part through 35 meetings around the state this summer attended by more than 1,500 people.
- rewards schools for the academic gains of students who still may not meet state standards but show significant progress.
- tracks the growth of specific students in the same school year over year to best assess the schooling environment – not other factors affecting a child's education.
- is an annual method for tracking school progress, not a one-time slam.

Is this another fad attempt at school improvement that will disappear with the next ADE administration?

More is expected of tomorrow's workers than ever before. We cannot continue to be satisfied with the status quo of our education system, especially when Arizona's academic performance lags the nation.

The public has long asked for school improvement. Now stakeholders, at the state and federal level, have agreed on three pieces of legislation to drive it:

- voter-approved Prop 301, supplying more funds to education in exchange for strong performance
- Arizona LEARNS, outlining fair school performance indicators
- the federal "No Child Left Behind Act," requiring regular gains in school performance as well as greater parent involvement and teacher preparation.

These pieces of legislation, coupled with an achievement process the public believes to be fair, means Arizona has taken bold steps toward comprehensive school improvement that will serve us well.